

Civic Participation



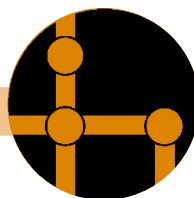
Access



Content



Diversity



Infrastructure



Literacy

The Internet has been hailed as the new town square of democracy. Unlike most information technologies that have come before, the Internet provides residents with a relatively low-cost opportunity to broadcast ideas, opinions, and political views to a mass audience. More importantly it provides powerful capacity for interaction and dialogue about community issues.

The Internet is still young. How well it serves as a tool for democracy and diversity is as yet an unanswered question, although many fear that it is already falling short. There are concerns about oversimplification of democracy with debate and dialogue being replaced by yes/no polls. The commercialization of the Internet has fostered intense competition for your online attention and threatens to leave smaller voices unheard. Despite these concerns, new voices are heard via the Internet and there are many working to promote the potential of the Internet as democratic medium, where a variety of content is supported and maintained.

The civic participation indicators presented here cover two aspects of electronic democracy. The first set of indicators captures the extent to which residents feel the Internet is an effective tool for dialogue about community issues and for reaching elected officials. Additional indicators measure use of electronic government services, also referred to as e-government.

The term e-government has been popularized in some circles, though its definition is still evolving. E-government is best considered in broad terms referring not just to online services but to all telecommunications media. For instance, telephones have long been a primary tool for reaching government officials. The advent of voicemail and push-button menus (technically called integrated voice response or IVR), revolutionized our contacts with government and business...sometimes for the better and sometimes not. In addition many communities have public and/or municipal cable television channels. Now the integration of television, telephone, and Internet services is simultaneously challenging and enabling governments to choose the most appropriate tool for reaching residents.

The City of Seattle strives to be a leader in applying information technologies to enhance access to services, increase public interaction with local government and enable effective input into policymaking.

Online payment and purchasing transactions are a major area of development for e-government. At this writing, the City of Seattle has a limited number of online transaction services. These include payment of parking tickets and other municipal court citations through the City's web site. For these indicators, we have used online payment of municipal court fines as a proxy to capture residents' use of electronic government for transactions.

On the City of Seattle's web site one may check the status of a building permit, register as a city vendor, and submit campaign finance reports. A large proportion of City forms may be downloaded and an increasing number of those forms are interactive, which means that they can be filled out and submitted online. While these services are important, we have not developed an indicator for them.

Information Technology as a Means for Civic Participation

Publication and delivery of government services and communications are increasingly delivered via the Internet. It is important to consider how this influences citizens' access to public officials and civic participation. The effectiveness of electronic participation and communication for civic means has not been evaluated before now. Email and web-based campaigns on political issues are becoming popular ways for special-interest groups to organize mass responses to legislation or to encourage action by elected officials. With the increased volume of email, are elected officials responding? Do people feel their voices are being heard?

Measurements

Residents who feel that the Internet and email are effective ways to communicate about issues that affect them and their community

49%

Residents who feel that email and the Internet are effective ways to communicate with elected officials

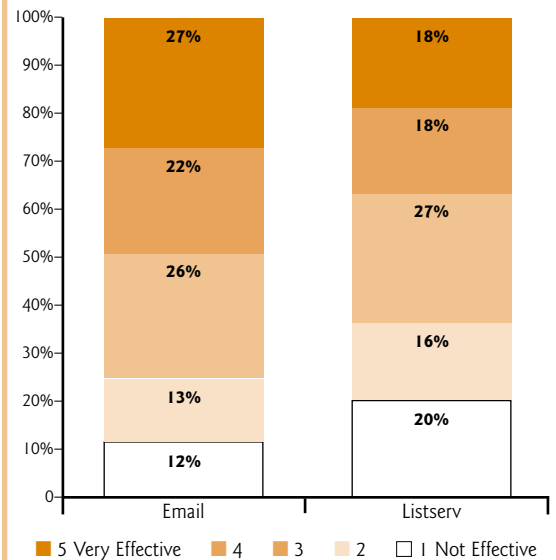
36%

Overall, survey respondents have mixed feelings about the Internet as a tool for civic participation. Residents are more positive about the Internet as a tool for communicating opinions about issues affecting the community than about the Internet as a way to communicate with elected officials.

- Women were significantly more likely than men to feel that the Internet is effective for communicating with elected officials.
- Young respondents, between 18 and 25, rated the Internet the lowest in terms of effectiveness in communicating with elected officials, while those between 51 and 64 rated the Internet the highest in both categories.
- Caucasians rate the Internet higher in terms of its effectiveness in communicating with elected officials than did other ethnic groups.

EFFECTIVENESS OF EMAIL AND INTERNET TO COMMUNICATE CIVIC ISSUES

(BASE: Computer and/or Internet Users)



Source: 2000 Seattle IT Residential Survey

Civic Participation Up Close

The Search for Effective Strategies

Residents want to be heard and make a difference. So too, elected officials want meaningful input to help guide debate and decisions. Our new digital toolbox includes email, the web, cell phones and more. Residents and policymakers alike are challenged to select the right tool at the right time. Challenges abound. We run the risk of info glut where messages become needles in a proverbial haystack. If the best organized and most effective users of new tools of technology leave a diversity of voices unheard, the resulting digital divide in participation restricts democracy rather than enhancing it.

We are still learning and searching for the best tools and most effective information technology strategies to connect people with government and government with the people in a timely way to influence policy and positive change. Below are a few examples of how the City of Seattle has begun using IT tools and how citizens have as well.



On the government side...

The City of Seattle has a long history of work fostering electronic civic participation predating the Internet and World Wide Web presence. Its first project was a dial-up bulletin board. Named the Public Access Network or PAN, the City enabled citizen groups to establish discussion forums. In the late 1990's Seattle City Council member Nick Licata developed an email list for his constituents and then used this to seek comment on whether the City should make a bid for the Olympic games. In 1999, the City Council solicited email comments as part of its hearing on the City budget. As the City moved to the web, it also carried forth its commitment to participation by hosting web sites and listservs for community groups and supporting an innovative community technology initiative to further access and literacy.

Seattle was also one of the first cities to video stream its government access TV channel programming over the Internet. This began in 1998. By 2000, the City had added the capacity to stream live as well as taped programming. The public could now watch the city channel directly on the Internet, live. As an on-going pilot project, meetings of the City Council Public Safety and Technology Committee have been broadcast on cable television and simultaneously streamed live; email comments may be sent during the meetings and are addressed during public comment time. This technology allows for a new method of engaging and informing citizens about government activities.

City hosted listservs have seen an increase in use as well. The City currently hosts neighborhood discussion lists to support community development work and provides announcement lists, on topics ranging from crime prevention to construction updates to neighborhood news.

Many elected officials will tell you they are excited by the web and overwhelmed by email, but are searching for ways to use it most effectively. The City is now embarking on a new "Democracy Portal" project, intended to more strategically integrate cable television, the Internet and traditional media outlets into an effective forum for public education and input. On another track, Judy Nicastro, a Seattle City Council member, began an attempt in March 2002 to raise funds to develop a live web camera project. The live camera would enable the public to follow her through her work for the electorate. Whether or not a "councilorcam" project becomes reality, it is an indication of the excitement and challenge of seeking effective ways to use information technology to engage residents in government.



On the citizens' side....

A number of community organizations and interest groups have been using email and web sites for public education, fundraising and organizing. Organizations such as ONE/Northwest assist community organizations in developing their IT capacity and using it effectively for education and advocacy. Following is an example of the use of information and communication technologies in a cam-

Civic Participation Up Close, *continued*

paigned by Yes For Seattle, a group of environmental activists who organized to bring about changes in Seattle's water policy.



Yes For Seattle's goal was to pass I-63, a ballot initiative to conserve water for the benefit of salmon in fish-bearing creeks and rivers.

In September 2001, as a direct result of the citizen-sponsored campaign to put I-63 on the November ballot, the City Council passed a substitute measure that agreed to increase conservation of water, retrofit low-income housing for conservation, and devote more water to preserving endangered salmon runs.

Information technology played a large role in allowing Yes For Seattle to organize a massive signature gathering campaign and distribute information quickly to supporters. According to Sacha Crittenden, campaign manager, "We had to set up our organization and campaign just a few weeks before signature gathering started. Everything happened really quickly.

"We gathered 26,000 signatures and qualified the initiative by July 26," Crittenden said. "After that, we were in constant lobbying negotiations, conversations or some other form of communication with city council, our board members, our constituents and volunteers.

"We used IT on four different levels. We have a web site, email, a database, and a listserv that goes out to all of our volunteers and supporters. A listserv newsletter kept people abreast of the campaign. And there was a progress report to our internal campaign committee, and that went out by email.

"Our database was crafted specifically for signature gathering, which means it has a lot of functions. You input the number of signatures somebody gathered, and where and when they were gathered. And you can do reports by location, county and date and all." These reports allowed Yes for Seattle to publish up-to-date figures on the signature gathering campaign in a weekly electronic newsletter. This turned out to be a great motivator for volunteers to achieve their signature-gathering goals.

"I think during the lobbying campaign, the listserv was critical to our success," Crittenden continued.

"We used it to send out action alerts. The speed of the listserv helped us win. Things were changing every day and we were sending action alerts every couple of days. People forwarded action alerts to other lists. The effect was like ever-expanding concentric circles. We reached a lot of people.

"The web site was used mostly to direct media or people who were looking for copies of the initiative. And we had a big FAQ there with our responses to all of the questions. The web site also had a volunteer sign-up form that produced a lot of volunteers."

In the end, I-63 never made it to the November ballot. Instead, the city council passed the substitute measure before the election, meeting the goals of the original initiative. Effective communication with their supporters, a well-organized campaign with strategic use of information technology, and many hours of hard work all contributed to Yes For Seattle's success.

Information Technology as a Means of Accessing Government Services

Many local, state and federal governments are currently experimenting with “e-government,” meaning the ability to access government services and get government information electronically. E-government can become more productive and cost-effective by increasing the opportunities for citizens to access information, fill out forms, pay bills, and sign-up for services from any computer, at any hour of the day. E-government is also seen as a new way to engage citizens in civic participation and encourage a more “user-friendly” image of the democratic (and bureaucratic) process. Along with ensuring that no one is left out, the goal for effective e-government is to design web sites that encourage using online services, market those sites to be sure that people are aware of what is available, and to respond quickly to improve and expand on e-government services.

Measurements

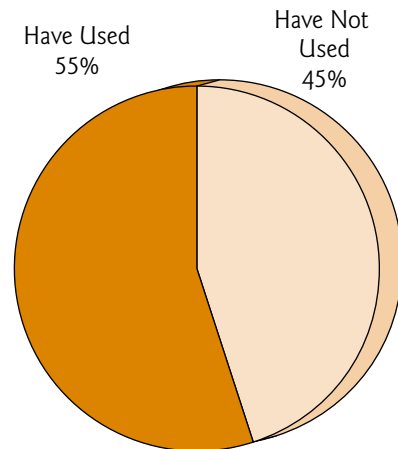
Percent of residents who have used the Internet to access information from government agencies in the past year	55%
Percent of residents who have visited the City’s web site	30%
Percent of City Municipal Court payments that are made online	1.4%

Seattle residents are using the Internet to obtain information on government agencies.

More than half (55%) of all residents and three out of five (60%) computer users indicate that they have used the Internet in the past year to find information from a city, county, state or federal government site.

The highest percentages of those who have sought information from a government agency on the web are between 36 and 50 years old, have a college education, and have upper/high upper household incomes. Whereas two-thirds (66%) of caucasians surveyed have sought information from a government agency on the

USE OF THE INTERNET TO OBTAIN INFORMATION ON GOVERNMENT AGENCIES



Source: 2000 Seattle IT Residential Survey

Internet, only 38 percent of African-Americans, 38 percent of Asian-Americans, and 30 percent of Hispanics respond similarly.

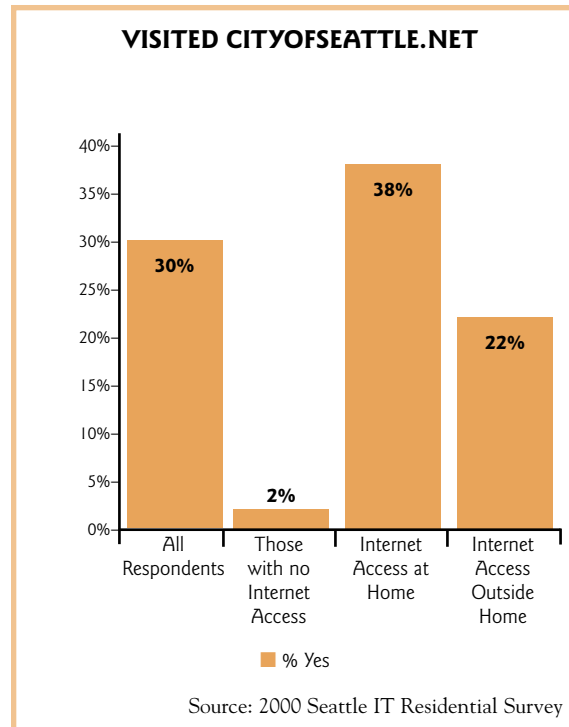
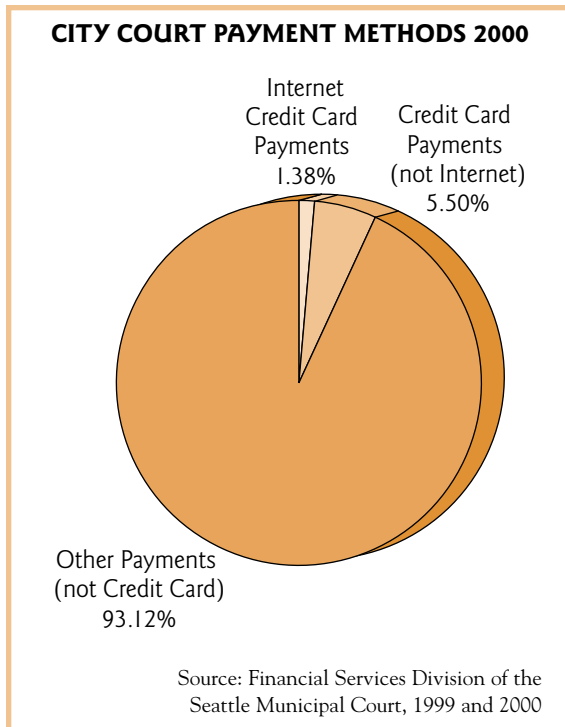
Many residents have visited the City’s web-site, www.cityofseattle.net.

About 30 percent of all residents have visited the City’s website. This includes more than



Access, as it exists now, should not be all that we are striving for. We, as citizens of Seattle, should think larger about how we conceptualize an information and communication technology infrastructure that would really help us as a city.

—Doug Schuler, Author and educator



one-third (36%) of those with Internet access. This is an increase from the 1999 Citywide Residential survey when only 18 percent of residents had accessed cityofseattle.net.¹

Who visits the City's Web Site?

- Residents between the ages of 26 and 50 are the most likely to have visited the city's web site.
- Those in the extremely low and low income brackets are significantly less likely to have visited the City's web site than those in all the higher income brackets. This is in part due to the lower level of computer and Internet usage in this population.

- Those with college degrees and higher are also more likely to visit the web site than those with less education.

The number of Municipal Court infractions paid online is increasing.

Currently, paying parking tickets and other Municipal Court infractions are the only financial transactions that can be completed on the City's web site. Only a very small portion of court payments are made online, but the number doubled between 1999 and 2000, and is on track to double again in 2001.

- Of the 554,923 payments made between January 1st and December 31st of 2000,



Seattle is in a unique position among cities to not just react to technology changes, but to shape those changes. We have an opportunity not just to envision the future, but to create that future.

—Gregory Nickels, Mayor, City of Seattle

38,158 (5.5% of total) payments were made by credit card, 20 percent of which were paid over the Internet.

- Internet payments accounted for only about 1.4 percent of the total court payments in 2000. However, this is more than double the number seen in 1999, when only 0.57% of Municipal Court payments were made through the Internet.



More than half (57%) of those with cable television have watched the City of Seattle's local government cable television

channel. Cable television provides a vehicle for local, county and state government to provide programming. Live interactive programs provide viewers the opportunity to call or email elected officials and government employees or other issue experts with questions and receive immediate answers. With 60% of households subscribing to cable, this would mean that one out of three (33%) adults in the city has seen or watched the municipal channel. Almost half (44%) of those who have watched the channel report that they have watched City Council meetings.²

Notes

1 City of Seattle Executive Services Division. 1999 *Citywide Residential Survey*. See www.cityofseattle.net/pan/survey99.htm.

2 City of Seattle Department of Information Technology, 2000 *Seattle IT Residential Survey*, p 115.